2020

Many Makers: Collaborative Renewal of Chahta Nan Tvnna (Choctaw Textiles)

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Published in Hidden Stories/Human Lives: Proceedings of the Textile Society of America 17th Biennial Symposium, October 15-17, 2020. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/
doi: 10.32873/unl.dc.tsasp.0075

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Introduction

As bark crackles between our fingers and the bast fibers of the dogbane stalks separate from the pithy core, we sit on Leslie and Celia's grandmother's porch and watch the other women twine their nettle skirts and chat in the Oklahoma afternoon breeze. Starting in 2018, a group of Choctaw textile artisans committed to pooling our collective skill, time, and passion for textile materials to create a series of pre-contact style Choctaw clothing for the future Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Cultural Center. Although none of us had produced a full garment before, a collective knowledge base regarding the perishable archaeological record and the ethnobotany of the Choctaw homelands equipped us to approach the making process as an opportunity to bring to life Indigenous clothing not seen in over two hundred years. As a Choctaw woman with a passion for textiles and engaged in the process of reconnecting with my Tribe, I was honored to lead this project through my role as a researcher in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO).

The production of this series of textiles ushers in a new phase in the reawakening of Chahta nan tvnna, Choctaw textiles.[1] Members of the Choctaw Nation revitalized a traditional art that had been sleeping for over two hundred years by bringing information from the archaeological and textual resources forward in an accessible way. A series of five twined skirts, three fingerwoven belts, and a twined top were produced as part of a larger collection of reproduction items for the Cultural Center. This paper focuses on the creation of a 1700's style Choctaw skirt made from bison hair and dogbane fiber sourced, harvested, processed, spun and twined by a group of approximately ten Choctaw artisans (Figure 1). Grounded in Indigenous theory and Southeastern North American archaeological textile collections, the Choctaw textile project uses a collaborative research methodology.

[1] Jennifer Byram, "Reawakening Chahta Nan Tvnna (Choctaw Textiles)," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, 2018, 1076.

Figure 1: Choctaw textile group with the bison-dogbane skirt, June 2019. Left to right: Richard Emhoolah, Francine Locke Bray, Leslie Stall Widener, Debra Pruett, Sandra Moore Riley, Jennifer Byram, Laura Henry, Michael Henry. Skirt artisans not pictured: Celia Meadows, Margaret Riley. Courtesy of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

Due to the ongoing processes of colonialism that continue to separate Indigenous people from our communities and lands, our relationships with traditional lifeways often lay dormant. As Choctaw Nation Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Dr. Ian Thompson writes, "Many contemporary Indigenous people hold the view that sleeping traditional knowledge is never really gone. It can be reawakened when modern people put themselves in the same place as their ancestors."[2] The collective construction of textiles presents an opportunity to reawaken the relationship between Choctaw people and our ancestors. Collaborative, community-based research is a vital intervention to the work of material culture preservation and education. Together the group contributes to rebuilding community, identity, and relations to the land all while producing textile materials that will further educate the community and broader public. This work joins a growing body of literature and momentum among Indigenous archaeologists returning archaeological knowledge to descendant communities as the primary knowledge keepers and producers of Indigenous material culture. Using Indigenous philosophies and Southeastern perishable archaeological literature, this article will present a collaborative research project to recreate garments from the pre-contact and early contact period in Choctaw history. This study discusses how the process of creating the textile followed the relational model of Indigenous philosophy connecting collaborators with the broader Choctaw community and land.

Literature Review

Rarely the focus of traditional archaeology in the Southeastern U.S., textiles and basketry are prone to rapid decay, and perishable archaeology relies heavily on secondary material and ethnographic sources. The role of textiles as part of Southeastern Indigenous women's arts and utilitarian spaces, an area marginalized in ethnographic accounts, may explain the paucity of literature into this material. Most perishable study in the Southeast has been tangential to pottery as the prevalence of textile-impressed pottery sherds allow for more extensive study of the

[2] Ian Thompson, *Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge* (Durant, OK: Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, 2019), x.

otherwise perishable medium. A seminal work, *Mississippian Village Textiles at Wickliffe* by Penelope Drooker provides, to date, the most comprehensive overview of Southeastern fabrics accessible to the academic and textile artisan alike.[3]

Southeastern perishable archaeology has relied primarily on observations and statistical analysis of textile impressed sherds as the bulk of the region's textile record, analyzing for frequency of s versus z twist yarns or variations of twining or weaving techniques.[4] On the limited extant textile samples from archaeological collections, further studies delve into testing of fiber, dye, and pigment content.[5] Often Southeastern archaeological perishable literature relies on the study of unassociated funerary items, studies inappropriate for inclusion in many Indigenous community contexts. Such sources must be approached with respect towards Tribal Nations' cultural protocols as they continue to repatriate and care for ancestral remains under the protection of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990.

Work in Indigenous textiles in the Southeast also relies on other forms of perishable collections, such as basketry. The work of basketweavers like Thomas Colvin and Claude Medford have preserved invaluable knowledge passed down through countless generations of Choctaw artisans.[6] More recent archaeological work provides a step closer in demonstrating experimental archaeological study of the perishable archaeological record.[7] These findings have been more accessible to Indigenous artisans and their work has been frequently distributed in Indigenous community spaces on social media. Attention to these works by Indigenous artisans attests to the need for additional research in this area to be made available to a growing audience extending beyond academic circles.

In recent decades, the growing disciplines of Indigenous archaeology and collaborative research have made great strides in bringing Indigenous philosophies and ethical methods into academic practices.[8] Indigenous archaeologists have called for the broader discipline of archaeology to engage in Indigenous methodologies as an improved working model to decolonize archaeological practices and engage with broader publics and collaborative community efforts. These writers also promote greater accountability to descendant communities and reciprocity in

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[3] Penelope B Drooker, *Mississippian Village Textiles at Wickliffe* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1992).
[4] E. J. Tiedemann and K. A. Jakes, "An Exploration of Prehistoric Spinning Technology: Spinning Efficiency and Technology Transition," *Archaeometry* 48, no. 2 (2006): 293–307; Penelope B Drooker, "Approaching Fabrics Through Impressions on Pottery," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, 2000, 773.
[5] Kathryn A Jakes and Annette G Ericksen, "Prehistoric Use of Sumac and Bedstraw as Dye Plants in Eastern North America," *Southeastern Archaeology* 20, no. 1 (2001): 56–66; Angela Gordon and Richard C. Keating, "Light Microscopy and Determination of Eryngium Yuccifolium Michaux Leaf Material in Twined Slippers from Salts Cave, Kentucky," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 28, no. 1 (2001): 55–60.
[6] Thomas A Colvin, "Cane and Palmetto Basketry of the Choctaw of St. Tammany Parish," in *The Work of Tribal Hands: Southeastern Indian Split Cane Basketry*, ed. Dayna Bowker Lee and H.F. Pete Gregory (Natchitoches, LA: Northwestern State University, 2006), 73–96; American Indian Archaeological Institute, "Claude Medford, Jr.: Choctaw Basketmaker," *Artifacts* X, no. 4 (1982): 3–4.
[7] Elizabeth Temple Horton, "The Ties That Bind: Traditions and Fiber Use in the Ozark Plateau" (Washington University in St. Louis, 2010); Mary Spanos, "Mississippian Textiles at Beckum Village (ICK24), Clarke County, Alabama" (University of Alabama, 2006); Susan Ream Wilson, "Spinning (Bunny) Tails: An Adventure in Experimental Archaeology," *Illinois Antiquity* 31, no. 3–4 (n.d.).
[8] Sonya Atalay, "Indigenous Archaeology as Decolonizing Practice," *The American Indian Quarterly* 30, no. 3–4 (2006): 280–310; Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al., "The Premise and Promise of Indigenous Archaeology," *American Antiquity* 75, no. 2 (2010): 228–38.

archaeology. Further, as Indigenous archaeology tends to have community-driven research goals, it has the opportunity to address questions that are identified as being relevant to living people.

Outside of archaeology, the work of Shawn Wilson provides an Indigenous research framework that can be applied across disciplines to respond to this need to reform Western scientific methods by creating research that is accountable to communities and relational in design.[9] Robin Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* is a rare example that weaves ecology with Indigenous understandings of land and community, showing how these relationships are crucial for conducting better research from both an Indigenous and Western scientific perspective.[10] The area of textile study, as seen by the publications in the Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings over the last decades, has been a haven for the rare publications of this nature of collaborative, community responsive research.[11] Among international Indigenous communities, Maori and Native Hawaiian textile research has matured, deftly navigating the modern place of traditional Indigenous textiles and incorporating Indigenous and Western academic theories for a critical approach to the study of Indigenous textiles.[12] Hanalei Marzan, in a 2020 virtual scholar series, spoke to reassembling the knowledge system of Hawai'ian textiles and being sensitive to the intention imbued in textiles both created today and in the past. For Marzan, the place in Indigenous society for the traditional textile is one that is negotiated and responds to traditional cultural protocols as well as the needs of the community to honor new forms of leadership through artistry.

The area of Southeastern perishables has been historically understudied and rarely addressed in academic literature with the intent to tie the research into communities and Indigenous philosophies of practice. This project engages these theoretical bodies in positioning precontact textile revitalization efforts in an Indigenous community. This article builds on the important work of Ian Thompson who brought together Indigenous methodology, revitalization efforts, and archaeological research into applied work within a Tribal Historic Preservation Office.[13] From this position, researchers follow the model of creating research that is by, for, and with Indigenous people.[14] Bringing the archaeological literature into modern Indigenous spaces with native fiber materials unfamiliar to many today, these textile practices have a resonance when studied in practice and in community. When the Indigenous community can access these archaeological materials through educational interventions, Indigenous artisans can engage with the materiality of the archaeological record and native fiber resources in creative ways. When Indigenous people put themselves in the same place as their ancestors, many can relearn the

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[9] Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood, 2008).
[10] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).
[11] Wirihana, "Kākahu as Cultural Identity"; Sheehan, "Nd'awakananawal Babijigwezijik Wd'elasawawôganôl: 'We Wear the Clothing of Our Ancestors'"; Aulay and Waru-Rewiri, "Maori Weaving: The Intertwining of Spirit, Action and Metaphor."
[12] Amiria Henare, "Nga Aho Tipuna (Ancestral Threads): Maori Cloaks from New Zealand," in *Clothing as Material Culture*, ed. Susanne Küchler and Daniel Miller (New York: Berg, 2005); Hanalei Marzan and Taupōuri Tangarō, "'A'ahu Kinolau (Ritual Wear of Transformation), Regalia in Leadership," *Hawai'i Papa O Ke Ao, University of Hawai'i*, November 19, 2020.
[13] Thompson, *Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge*; Ian Thompson, "Chahta Ilukfi Nan Isht Ikbit [Choctaw Pottery]," *The Southern Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2014): 162.
[14] Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al., "The Premise and Promise of Indigenous Archaeology."

same insights that led to the development of traditional culture in the first place. As Thompson demonstrates in his book on Choctaw foodways, this can empower nation-rebuilding in ways that can reverse some aspects of colonization and lead to a higher quality of life.[15] In the applied space between perishable archaeologies of the Southeast and Indigenous archaeological traditions, Indigenous artisans breathe new life into the study of these records and push forward more meaningful understandings of the archaeological record for both academic and public engagement. With this framework in mind, we turn to the core of our project, the fibers that draw our community together and allow us to explore these relationships.

Planning: From Textile Parts to a Whole Garment

The Choctaw textile community group is made up of a diverse group of women and men with varying backgrounds in arts and a passion for making past lifeways come alive. In 2016, I started a position in the Tribal Historic Preservation Office with a focus on researching pre-contact Choctaw textile traditions and documenting Choctaw arts in museum collections worldwide. As I became familiar with the fibers and techniques, I began to meet like-minded talented Choctaw artists across the country who were adept researchers with a keen interest in revitalizing traditional arts. Recognizing that textile revitalization was a project of a broader community, I began to call up Choctaw artists and meet with community members to drum up interest in a textile workshop. In March 2018, a group of fifteen men and women came from across the country to meet, talk textiles, and play with the fibers of our ancestral homelands. From there, the group continued meeting monthly, growing more familiar with pre-contact and early contact style Choctaw textiles and the skills and materials involved in making them.

After six months of meeting as a new and growing textile artisan community through workshops and sharing the narrative of Choctaw textile history through the Choctaw Labor Day Festival and Choctaw youth camps, an opportunity was presented to the group to produce garments for the upcoming Choctaw Nation Cultural Center. This included a series of skirts, sashes, and textile samples. A group of ten embarked on a project to create one skirt starting from raw material to the finished garment, spending nine months from harvest of the materials to completion. The group started with varying levels of expertise and worked at a slower pace than ancestral artisans with a lifetime of experience. As we established techniques to process the fibers and sourced tools to better fit the tasks of working with raw fiber sources, we gained experience and improved the quality of our work. Garments for the Cultural Center were based on extant archaeological examples of textiles in the form of textile impressed pottery sherds and ethnographic descriptions of eighteenth-century garments and textile production.

Beginning in the fall of 2018, we planned out a garment based on an eighteenth century French anonymous account of Choctaw women in French Louisiana that describes "a tissue, partly of [bison] wool, and partly of fibre from a very strong herb which they spin. This tissue is double like the two-sided handkerchiefs and thick as canvas, half an ell wide and three quarters long. That serves them as a skirt."[16] From this description, we chose to use a bison hair warp alongside a dogbane weft. Dogbane is from the *Apocynaceae* family and is one of the common fiber plants in North America, also referred to as Indian hemp by early Europeans in the region. English fur

[15] Thompson, *Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge*.
[16] John Reed Swanton, "An Early Account of the Choctaw Indians," *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association* 5 (1918): 67–68.

trader James Adair describes Choctaw beaded shot-pouches made from bison hair.[17] The structure used to create the fabric of the skirt commonly appears in the archaeological record and consists of plain spaced twining of weft rows.[18] The skirt measurements approximated those for a knee length skirt, matching other descriptions from the time and region, and this we interpreted as a double layer, wrap-around skirt. The hem was based on twined bag rim construction, adding a decorative element and providing a braid with which to secure the skirt at the waist.

From Hide and Stalk to Fiber

Processing and spinning the dogbane was the most labor and time intensive phase of the project, partly due to variable quality in the raw materials gathered, and this step extended over four months alongside the twining stage. The dogbane was sourced initially from two locations in Southeastern Oklahoma in the spring and in the late summer of 2018: in Antlers and in Idabel, from areas both in sun and shade and along a roadside ditch. These stalks were thin and short, around half an inch in diameter and three feet in height. In December 2018 and March 2019, dogbane was located and harvested by my parents and myself at the Morton Arboretum in Naperville, Illinois with the generous support of the Arboretum. Here I reconnected with the land of my childhood, far from Choctaw homelands, yet yielding new knowledge and resources that taught me more about the diversity of this plant. The dogbane from Illinois was more substantial, up to an inch in diameter and six feet in height and yielded higher quality and quantity of fiber. The dogbane sourced in Illinois is probably more akin to the dogbane that would have been available to Choctaw ancestors in the traditional homelands where rich soil would have led to taller dogbane stalks and longer, more robust fibers. The dogbane was then dew retted for four to six weeks but unfortunately this did not significantly improve the efficiency of removing bark from the fiber. Further experimental research is needs to be conducted on dogbane to ascertain the circumstances in which fiber content and processing can be maximized and matched to Indigenous extant examples with higher fiber quality.

For this project we extracted hair from untanned bison rawhide. We brushed out the hide then collected the short down hair and separated out the guard hairs. To maximize the material for its experimental value, we processed the hide with two methods: first by painstakingly removing the hair in two-to-three-inch cross sections with a blade as close to the skin as possible; next, using a "pulled wool" method on the remainder of the hide, we proceeded to soak the remaining hide sections in water and wood ash for more than a week to pull the hair from the skin The pulled wool method is particularly messy, but the process may have resulted in adding more grab to the particularly short bison down. The fiber extraction process needs further systematic experimental study, but this was beyond the scope of our project.

From Fiber to Yarn

Over the course of eight months, from November through June, our group took on the various tasks that would go into assembling the skirt. Materials and tools were dispersed at several gatherings and taken on by artisans based on experience, preference, and interest. Dogbane processing, separating the fibers from the pith and bark, was best done with company: two sisters, Leslie Stall Widener and Celia Stall Meadows, took on a bulk of dogbane processing while they sat on their grandmother's front porch. Couples Sandra Riley and Richard Emhoolah

[17] James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: Edward & Charles Dilly, 1775), 423.
[18] Drooker, *Mississippian Village Textiles at Wickliffe*, 100–105.

and Laura and Michael Henry brought home bison hair and worked together to wash and card. Hundreds of hours went into this stage which required more than four months for a group of approximately ten artisans to work on hundreds of stalks of dogbane and half of a hide worth of bison hair.

As we began spinning with these materials, we quickly learned that typical modern spinning standards would not neatly apply to the project. Our goal was to match the spinning tools as closely as possible to available precontact tool forms which meant spinning with spindles. To spin bison hair alone, we relied on a higher twist to hold the fibers together and created a tight two-ply yarn. Debra Pruett, a Choctaw artisan from Missouri who commuted in to join the project, was uncomfortable with a drop spindle and resorted to using a "Mayan spinner" to spin the bulk of the yarn for the skirt project. Initially this was met with some hesitance as it was outside our knowledge base. However, in 2020, a turn of the twentieth century 'Alibamu' spinner from the collections of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History was brought to our attention that bears a striking resemblance to the Mayan spinner Debra used the year before (Figure 2). This spinner did not add additional weight in spinning the short fibers and allowed Debra greater control over the twist of the yarn as she worked. With few known textile tools in the Southeastern archaeological record, this spinner is a reminder that revitalization work can benefit from a comparative approach and philosophy of "casting a wide net" and supplement information from textile traditions that share basic structural similarities.[19]

Figure 2a (Left): Moss-Twister, Livingston, TX, Alibamu, Accession in 1910, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, E261774-0 ("Moss -Twister, E261774-0," n.d.) Figure 2b (Right): Debra Pruett spinning bison hair with her "Mayan spinner" in June 2019. Courtesy of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

From Yarn to Garment

The final skirt consisted of 420 meters of two-ply dogbane yarn and 260 meters of two-ply bison hair yarn. The twining portion, set up on a pair of dowel rods as a free-hanging warp, was the most efficient part of the process and took only two weeks for Choctaw-Chickasaw artisan Sandra Riley to complete. The skirt band was finished in a fingerwoven bag rim technique, at the selvedges with looping the weft back in, and at the hem with fringe.[20] This stage taught us about the durability of dogbane which has low tolerance for friction and thus poorly handles mistakes that require untwining and retwining. The skirt only used a portion of the bison hide yarn,

[19] Max Carocci, "Clad with the 'Hair of Trees': A History of Native American Spanish Moss Textile Industries," *Textile History* 41, no. 1 (2010): 3–27.
[20] Drooker, *Mississippian Village Textiles at Wickliffe*, 63.

perhaps less than a third of the total hair from the hide. The twining process proved economical with yarn sources and left very little waste yarn. This quality would be desirable with such a high time and labor investment in the yarn production stage. The final product, a two-layered knee-length wrap around skirt, is a sensory experience in itself: lofty, warm, and light (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Finished bison-dogbane skirt, July 2019. Courtesy of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

The experience of making in a group, a complex endeavor to coordinate, reaffirmed that to amass such a supply of processed and prepared materials from the land, women likely relied on each other and socialized throughout the creative journey. Throughout the process, we continued meeting monthly with the group, a gathering that drew Choctaw artisans and community members in from a broad range of locations and provided an opportunity to teach new members about the archaeological record, the materials sourced from the land, and the ways to bring these techniques into modern ways of making with simple store-bought yarns and tools. In addition, artists involved in the project were able to bring the materials home to our families and share the process as we contributed to the larger project. With many of us responsible for earning a living or caring for family, the scope of a project of this magnitude and the research behind it are beyond the reach of a modern Choctaw lifeway; taken in concert with other Choctaw artisans in a relational model, such a project becomes attainable and carries the added benefit of growing an artist community.

Relationality: The Community

Central to this project is the Indigenous research methodology of relationality. In his work *Research is Ceremony*, Shawn Wilson writes that, “Knowledge itself is held in the relationships and connections formed with the environment that surrounds us. This reinforces the… point that knowledge, theories and ideas are only knots in the strands of relationality that are not physically

visible but are nonetheless real."[21] Wilson puts into words the methods used in the Choctaw Nation's THPO office and in this project: we are using textiles to (re)build and (re)awaken the relationship between people, community, environment, resources, practices, history, archaeology, museum collections, knowledge, ideas. Due to the ongoing processes of colonialism which distance Indigenous communities from their identity, the land, and one another, some of these relationships are still sleeping, awaiting intentional efforts to revitalize practices and knowledge that serve as bridges of relationality in research.

Choctaw "women's work" is markedly absent or fleeting in the ethnographic record. Sparse comments exist that allude to "women's work" in Choctaw culture: agriculture, cloth-making, and land-based activities. In discussing our role of making and reflecting on generations of Choctaw women making before us, Choctaw textile artisan Debra Pruett reminded me that we are not creating nor living in the same mindset as the women who went before us: our mindset is colonized (personal correspondence, 2020). We cannot assume that through analogy, ethnoarchaeology, or experimental methods, we arrive at an experience that mirrors Choctaw lifeways of the past. However, as Debra and I discussed the project, we agreed that as Choctaw people living in the world today, we can make strides forward in projects like these to rekindle connections to our ancestors through connections to community and to the land.

The work of revitalizing traditional arts and textiles fits into a larger project of reinvigorating Indigenous community through traditional lifeways. These projects provide a way for Choctaws to actively engage in shaping Indigenous futures within a framework tied to the past. The ongoing work of the Choctaw Nation in rebuilding and strengthening community wellness through providing access to food, traditional arts, exercise, and medical centers as well as a new Choctaw Cultural Center are all part of exercising Indigenous sovereignty. The Choctaw textile artisan group that formed in 2018 was modeled after the work of Thompson and others to revitalize Choctaw pottery in Oklahoma in recent years.[22] These classes cater to Choctaw community members and encourage sharing of ideas, teaching one another, and the core concept of relationality with the community and the land. Claude Medford, a well-known Choctaw-Apache basketweaver who worked to revitalize Southeastern arts in the mid-twentieth century, expressed that "I hope to be able to go to the people wherever they live, scattered throughout Louisiana in the forests and swamps, and perhaps while we are working together, we can restore the pride in craftsmanship... There are so few people who make these basket shapes that when I meet someone who makes them, I feel what a blue whale feels when he or she meets another blue whale."[23] Medford's statement speaks to the belonging that one knows in sharing the knowledge of something that connects Indigenous artisans to one another and to past ancestors.

Considering the time involvement of these projects, it requires us to reflect on the amount of everyday life consumed by the act of working with fibers in a time when clothing was produced entirely by hand in the home. In a group of ten people, the making of one skirt from raw material to wearable garment took a minimum of 250 hours. Recognizing the production of textiles as a necessary part of life, we can imagine that the raw material preparation was a task best done incorporated to the fabric and rhythm of everyday life. The activity of processing dogbane, for

[21] Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, 87.
[22] Thompson, "Chahta Ilukfi Nan Isht Ikbit [Choctaw Pottery]."
[23] American Indian Archaeological Institute, "Claude Medford, Jr.: Choctaw Basketmaker."

example, is tedious, lengthy, and produces only a small amount of usable fiber. To produce enough fiber of a high enough quality for a full, durable garment, we can imagine that women might work together towards this project while performing other daily tasks.

Those involved the traditional arts and community activities spanned multiple generations and the spaces for making were likely shared with other activities of socializing, entertaining and watching children. We can see later communities of Choctaw women quilting together as echoes of potential earlier gatherings around textile production.[24] Children could help with these tasks and, as my own time spent teaching Choctaw children to process dogbane at summer camps can attest, quickly become as competent as adults in processing the plants for fiber. Today, by integrating traditional textiles into children's programs, Choctaw youth can connect with Choctaw identity, community, and lands through these resources (Figure 4). For earlier generations, the role of children in textiles would not have been simply to learn but also to contribute. Gilbert Thompson, born in Choctaw Territory in 1848, recalled that, "In the winter I had to sit down on the floor and pull the seed from the cotton and it sure was tiresome for it took me several nights to get the seed out of the cotton that mother wanted to use for socks and mittens."[25] While youth could help with the long task of removing fibers from the pith and bark of a plant, older women might also multitask in contributing to the work of community life. In describing the maintenance of a type of Choctaw agricultural field, Thompson writes that "Older women sat on [elevated, shaded] platforms during the day, working on artwork and scaring away birds, animals, or hungry boys that tried to enter the patch."[26] Much like Leslie Stall Widener and Celia Stall Meadows, two Choctaw sisters who participated in the bison-dogbane skirt project, sat on their late grandmother's front porch processing dogbane and talking for hours on end, these grandmothers could protect the fields while their hands stayed busy adding to the supply of fiber materials for future projects.

Figure 4: Watching Tom Colvin process bear grass at a workshop in Antlers, OK, December 2019. Courtesy of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

[24] Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, "Piece by Piece: Choctaw Women Quilters," *Biskinik*, 2018.
[25] Johnson H Hampton, "Interview with Mr. Gilbert Thompson" (Tuskahoma, OK: Works Progress Administration, 1937), 302.
[26] Thompson, *Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge*, 86.

In an Indigenous community context, we can consider how fiber supplies might have been shared or even communal, conserving precious resources and ensuring that everyone in the community had what they needed to clothe their family. An account from the Choctaw removal period in the mid-nineteenth century provides insight into the storage and distribution of arts materials for a community of women artisans: "According to Simpson bottles of each kind [of dye] were entrusted to each captain of the five bands which remained in Mississippi after the general removal, and if word was received that certain people were going camping and that the women of the party intended to make baskets, the captain sent them some native dye by pony."[27] While this exact method for sharing dyes may have arisen uniquely in response to the removal period when the Choctaw community was undergoing immense turmoil, this sharing of resources alludes to a philosophy of community-oriented textile work. Fibers, like river cane used for the basketry for which these dyes were gathered, can be stored in stable conditions for many years after processing until a woman is ready to use them. Just as the Choctaw textile artisans of the twenty-first century have collectively processed and spun the fibers to be used in the skirt, it is likely that Choctaw ancestors related with their textile materials in a similar manner.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, cotton production was taken on by Choctaw women who had long worked with fiber to create cloth.[28] Choctaw language reflects the continuity of textile production knowledge in a robust representation of cotton textile production terms which also alludes to a need to communicate and collaborate between Choctaw artisans.[29] Earlier fibers likely fit into the same patterns of processing as a task that could be shared as well. Foraging for textile materials in a modern Choctaw world, removed from the homelands, and in an era where Choctaws no longer tend to plants over generations, we must reacquaint ourselves with the landscape around us. The relationships to land within Choctaw memory are apparent in language, as the word *vpi* can be used both for warp and for the stalk or branch.[30] As we continue to learn about the textile traditions, we can continue to search for these connections to help us relate back to Choctaw ancestral ways of relating to the land. Here we turn to a discussion of relationality as it is found in connection to Indigenous homelands.

Relationality: Homelands

In an Indigenous worldview, relationality extends not only to humans but also to non-humans. Relationality to the land is an important tenet of Indigenous research and inherent in any textile art, relying on materials from the land. In writing on Mohawk baskets through and Indigenous philosophical model, Robin Wall Kimmerer reveals the way that baskets can only be made through an intimate relationship with the land.

> The marvel of a basket is in its transformation, its journey from wholeness as a living plant to fragmented strands and back to wholeness again as a basket. A basket knows the dual powers of destruction and creation that shape the world. Strands once separated are rewoven into a new whole. The journey of a basket is also the journey of a people. With

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[27] John Reed Swanton, *Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government, 1931), 41.

[28] James Taylor Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaws from Prehistory to Removal* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1999).

[29] Allen Wright, *Chahta Leksikon: A Choctaw in English Definition. For the Choctaw Academies and Schools* (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing, 1880).

[30] Cyrus Byington, *A Dictionary of the Choctaw Language* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1915), 1915.

> their roots in riverside wetlands, both black ash and sweetgrass are neighbors on the land. They are reunited as neighbors in the Mohawk baskets… Also woven into the baskets are the laughter and the stories of the gathered women, where English and Mohawk blend together in the same sentence. Sweetgrass coils around the basket rim and threads the lids, so that even an empty basket contains the smell of the land, weaving the link between people and place, language and identity.[31]

Even as Kimmerer lays out a theory of basketry as a way for Indigenous community to connect with the land, we must recognize that in the Southeast this connection to land is not so straightforward. Southeastern Tribes were removed from our homelands throughout the nineteenth century and split into multiple federally recognized groups that were later further disrupted by events like the Indian Relocation Act of 1956. During the COVID-19 pandemic situation, the Choctaw textile artisans that join the virtual meetings call in from across North America while even more artisans follow along on social media seeking connection to ancestors, homelands, and our identity as Choctaw people.

Choctaw people have been increasingly dispossessed from our homelands, Alabama, and Mississippi, and later our adopted lands, Indian Territory and Oklahoma since the time of European contact. In quoting a Choctaw elder speaking to a government agent, "We wish to remain here where we have grown up as the herbs of the woods, and do not wish to be transplanted into another soil," Choctaw historian Donna Akers demonstrates that "The Choctaws saw themselves as part of the soil, an integral element of the ecosystem, tied inextricably to this specific part of the Earth."[32] Ongoing removals and migrations led to a diaspora of Choctaw people across the United States. Through the removals, we see both the pain of disconnecting from the homelands and the healing power of reconnecting to lands. What does it mean to reconnect with the land through ethnobotany, to a land that is not ours?

While Choctaws have been scattered across the United States and the world, we can continue to be connected to the land we live on in Indigenous ways and build relationships to our local environment using the Indigenous philosophies of relationality. To embark in a perishable archaeology research project in an Indigenous research paradigm, we engage with the textiles of the record through the ancestors who made them and the land that they interacted with and provided the fibers and dyes to make them. In creating these works of arts revitalization in Indigenous communities today, we can address the needs of Choctaw people, both youth and elders, in rebuilding relationships and getting to know the land wherever we live today. Just as Choctaw responded to dramatic change in the context of removal and continued to gather and use native plants in our ancestors' new lands, so Choctaws can continually reconnect with the Indigenous lands we call home even outside of federally recognized Choctaw lands.[33]

When faced with the daunting task of revitalizing the kinds of textiles made by Choctaw and Southeastern ancestors prior to the nineteenth century, we can learn through the land about the

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[31] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, 256–57.
[32] Donna Akers, "Removing the Heart of the Choctaw People: Indian Removal from a Native Perspective," in *Native Historians Write Back: Decolonizing American Indian History*, ed. Susan A Miller and James Riding In (Lubbock: Texas Tech University, 2011), 110–11.
[33] Thompson, *Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge*; Lynne Richards, "Folk Dyeing with Natural Material Oklahoma's Indian Territory," *Material Culture* 26, no. 2 (1994): 29–47.

textiles of the archaeological record. In happening across dogbane near my childhood home in Illinois, I was able to connect my own identity as a Choctaw person across time and space. These elements do not need to limit us or divide us from our community or the Indigenous arts collections held in museums and repositories across the globe. Rather, by engaging with these materials again and bringing them into the living context of the land, we renew these relationships that tie us back to the original artists and to an Indigenous community that spans hundreds of generations. For Choctaw author LeAnne Howe, "Land is past tense and present tense at the same time. The land actually is a wonderful space in physics that is all things at once—past, present, and future."[34] In creating textiles made from the land and inspired by the perishable archaeology of the past, Choctaw artisans are engaging in this Indigenous sense of time and the land in a way that transcends the past and present and, in sharing this knowledge with others, looks forward to future generations of makers.

Conclusion

In reminiscing about the project with Sandra Riley in 2020, we remember the way the bison-dogbane skirt project took over our homes, filling it with bark and fiber fluff following us around. As Sandra noted, now that we have completed one skirt and learned about the process through the experience, the second skirt would go much quicker and smoother. This project is merely one step in the ongoing creative process of building and maintaining relations between research, community, and land. In creating with the intent of learning and twining together relationships in the process, we not only created a garment, but we also created community and strengthened our identity through these traditions that connect us to Choctaws everywhere, geographically and temporally. Many of the group would like to see more of these garments worn at Choctaw gatherings to normalize older forms of Choctaw clothing. With more garments in circulation as the group continues to create, we can understand better how these clothes hold up under wear and the feeling of carrying the knowledge of the homelands on our person.

During the midst of the bison-skirt project, a group of women working on garments for the Cultural Center gathered at Leslie and Celia's grandmother's home to have a twining retreat. Amidst the laughter, the joking, and the camaraderie, the group learned and worked alongside one another. In 2020, Leslie writes of the experience:

> My grandmother, Eva Alton Hale would have loved having her house full of this talented group of Choctaw women. Decades ago, my grandmother and her friends spent long afternoons in the front room quilting from a frame, that was lowered from the ceiling. In June 2019, cars of women arrived and unloaded food and supplies at my family's historic home on our Choctaw allotment. They hung horizontal poles from hooks along the covered front porch, and on the backs of chairs. These women also joined in laughter, conversation and stories as they spun dogbane and buffalo wool into yarn and twined it into the skirts and sashes that seemed to appear as if by magic.

The experience was one that mirrored so many women's spaces that came before it, brought together by the work of textiles and the love for our Choctaw heritage. These moments speak to relationships that extend across time, into the memory of ancestors gone by and into the hope that these traditions will carry on for future generations.

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[34] Kirstin L. Squint, "Choctawan Aesthetics, Spirituality, and Gender Relations: An Interview with LeAnne Howe," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 35, no. 3 (2010): 219.

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